Through the Eyes of a Traveller

Posted on

A Journey into Sri Lanka’s Ancient Heart

Words Jack Thornton. **Photography** BT Images.



The Sigiriya Lion Rock Fortress stands proudly as a sentinel amidst the lush jungle surroundings.

The early morning mist clung to the trees as I set off on my journey through Sri

Lanka’s ancient heartland, a region where time seemed to fold in on itself. The Dry Zone, home to crumbling palaces, towering stupas, and sacred temples, had long intrigued me. As my tuk-tuk rattled down a dusty road, I wondered—what stories would these ancient stones whisper to me?

Sigiriya – Climbing the Lion Rock Fortress

The first glimpse of Sigiriya Rock Fortress took my breath away. Rising like a sentinel in the middle of the jungle, the 200-meter monolith stood bold, defiant, and mysterious. My guide, an elderly local named Sunil, leaned in with a knowing smile.

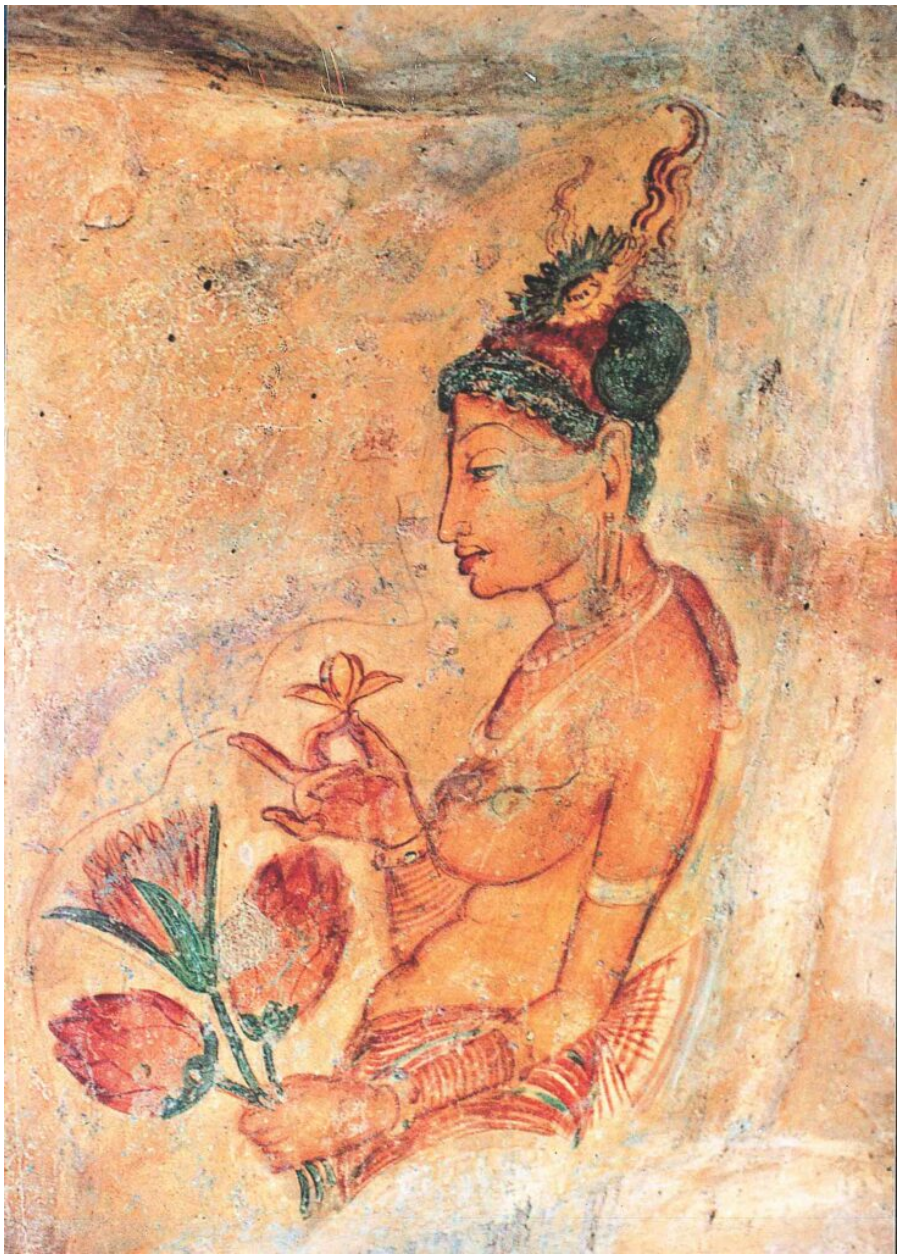
“This is no ordinary rock, my friend. This was once the kingdom of a king who feared his own brother.”

King Kashyapa, I had read, built this fortress in the fifth century to escape his brother’s wrath. The thought of a palace in the sky, with gardens, pools, and intricate frescoes, seemed almost mythical. But as I began my steep ascent, the reality of Sigiriya unfolded before my eyes.

I climbed past the water gardens, still symmetrical after 1,500 years. Halfway up, I reached the famous Sigiriya frescoes, painted on a sheer rock face. Sunil explained that these celestial maidens were once part of a much larger masterpiece.

Their delicate smiles and vibrant colors seemed almost alive, as if they were watching me climb. Then came the Lion’s Paws—two gigantic stone-carved paws flanking a stairway that once led into the mouth of a colossal lion. Only the paws remained, but standing before them, I could imagine the awe that ancient visitors must have felt.

The final climb was the toughest. The metal staircase clung to the rock’s edge, and the wind howled as if urging me to turn back. But reaching the top was like stepping into a lost world. The ruins of Kashyapa’s palace lay before me, framed by breathtaking views of endless jungle and faraway mountains. I closed my eyes, trying to picture the golden-roofed palace that once stood here. It was easy to see why this place was called the Eighth Wonder of the World.



Sigiriya Frescoes – the famous celestial maidens.

Dambulla Cave Temple – A Sacred Refuge

After the exhilarating climb at Sigiriya, my journey took a more spiritual turn at Dambulla Cave Temple. The climb up was gentler, but the air was thick with the

scent of burning incense and the sound of distant Buddhist chants.

As I stepped into the first cave, I was met with hundreds of Buddha statues, their golden forms illuminated by flickering oil lamps. The ceiling was a masterpiece of ancient art, covered in intricate murals depicting Buddha's life. The largest statue—a 15-meter-long reclining Buddha—was mesmerizing, its expression of deep tranquility filling the entire chamber with an overwhelming sense of peace.

I sat in silence, watching a group of pilgrims kneel in prayer. Despite being thousands of miles from home, I felt strangely connected to this place, as if its history and spirituality transcended time.



Dambulla Cave Temple is renowned to have the largest collection of Buddha statues and vibrant rock paintings in all of Southeast Asia.



Polonnaruwa – The Ghosts of a Glorious Past

Polonnaruwa was unlike anything I had seen before. The once-great 11th-century capital now lay in ruins, but the sense of grandeur and sophistication still lingered in the air.

I wandered through the Royal Palace of King Parakramabahu I, its towering walls giving me a glimpse of what must have been a magnificent royal court. The Vatadage, a circular shrine with intricate stone carvings, stood silent yet powerful, its ancient Buddha statues radiating calmness.

Then I found myself before the Gal Vihara, a sight that stopped me in my tracks. Four colossal Buddha statues, carved from a single rock, sat in meditative silence. The reclining Buddha, with its graceful expression of enlightenment, was

particularly moving. I sat before it, watching as the golden sunset cast shadows over its timeless face.

Polonnaruwa was not just ruins; it was a city that still spoke—of devotion, of resilience, of kings who dreamed of a civilization that would last forever.

> From the cloud-kissed heights of Sigiriya to the serene halls of Dambulla, from the silent ruins of Polonnaruwa to the enduring spirituality of Anuradhapura, every step had been a passage through time.



Gal Vihara showcases four magnificent Buddha images carved into a single granite rock, exemplifying the exceptional craftsmanship and cultural heritage of Sinhalese rock artistry.





The Polonnaruwa Vatadage stands as a magnificent testament to the rich history of the Kingdom of Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka.

Anuradhapura – The Beating Heart of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Soul

If Polonnaruwa was the city of kings, Anuradhapura was the city of the Buddha’s legacy. Dating back to the 4th century BCE, this was where Sri Lanka’s first great kingdom was born.

I arrived at Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, the oldest living tree in the world, said to have been planted from a branch of the very tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment. Pilgrims, dressed in white, sat in silent prayer beneath its spreading branches. A monk walked past, his saffron robe glowing in the sunlight, his face a picture of calmness.

Then, I beheld the Ruwanwelisaya Stupa. It was colossal—one of the largest stupas

in the world. Unlike the crumbling ruins of Polonnaruwa, this sacred monument stood tall and proud, its gleaming white dome touching the sky. As I circled it, I could hear the rhythmic chanting of monks and the occasional flutter of prayer flags in the wind.

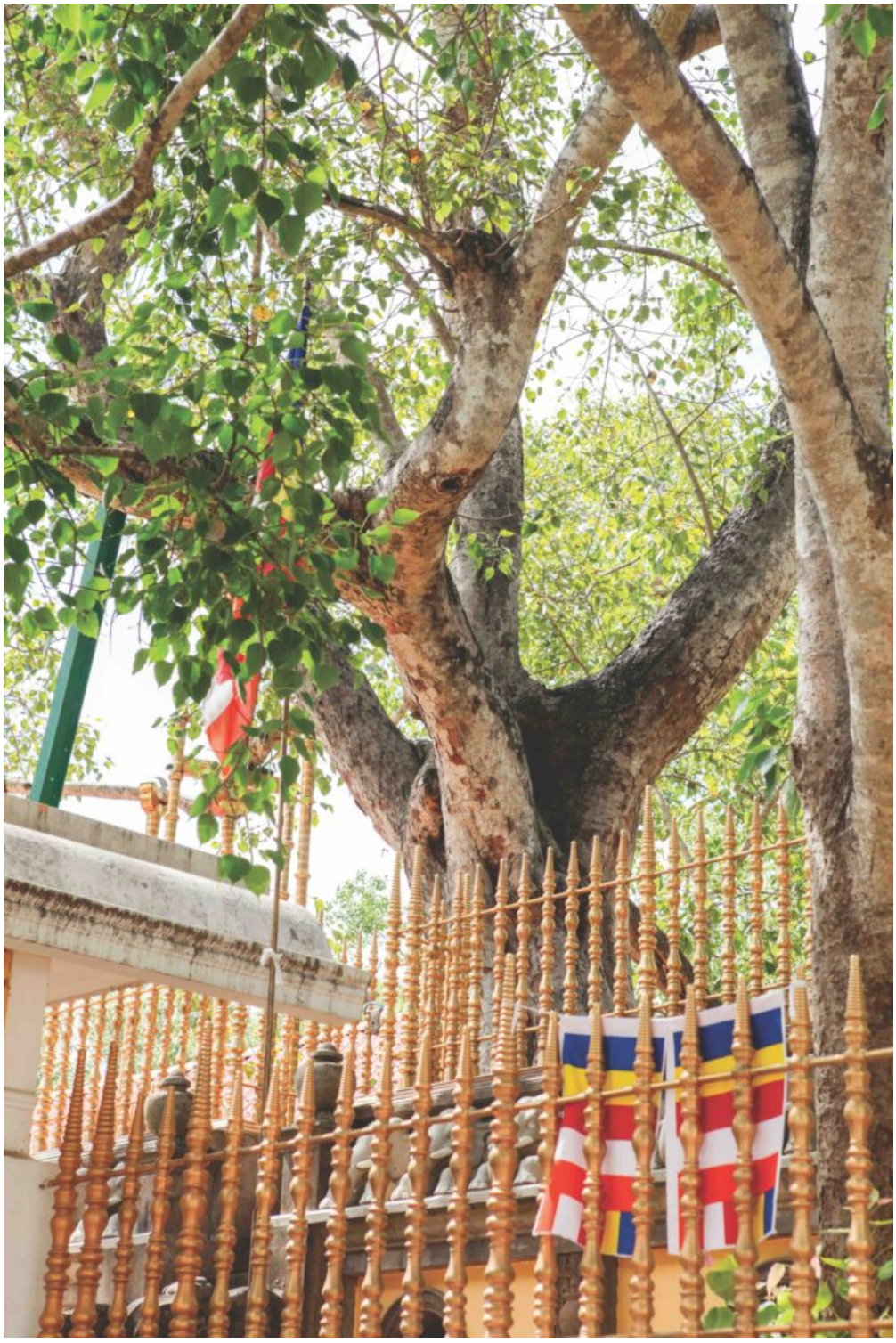
As night fell, I made my way to the Abhayagiri Monastery, once a center of Buddhist learning. Standing before its towering dagoba, I tried to picture the scholars and monks who once walked these paths, discussing philosophy, meditation, and the meaning of life. Anuradhapura felt timeless—not just a ruin of the past, but a living, breathing spiritual hub that still pulsed with devotion.

A Journey That Stays with You

As my journey through Sri Lanka’s Dry Zone came to an end, I realized that these ancient sites were more than just historical landmarks. They were fragments of a civilization that had mastered art, architecture, and spirituality long before modern cities were even dreamed of.From the cloud-kissed heights of Sigiriya to the serene halls of Dambulla, from the silent ruins of Polonnaruwa to the enduring spirituality of Anuradhapura, every step had been a passage through time.

As I left, I knew that I had not just visited these places—I had lived them, felt them, and carried them within me.

Sri Lanka’s history was no longer just something written in books. It was now a part of my own story.



The Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, a revered sacred bo tree in the Mahamewuna Garden of Anuradhapura.



The Ruwanwelisaya Stupa stands as a magnificent symbol of grandeur, showcasing incredible architectural brilliance and cultural significance.



Abhayagiri Vihāra in Anuradhapura – one of the largest Buddhist ruins globally, attracts many pilgrims and offers deep insights into Buddhist culture.